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WITCHCRAFT, SORCERY,
MAGIC, and other
PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMEN

and their implications on

MILITARY and PARAMILITAR
OPERATIONS in the Congo

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WITCHCRAFT, SORCERY, MAGIC, AND OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA
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OPERATIONS IN THE CONGO

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WITCHCRAFT, SORCERY, MAGIC, AND OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA AND
THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON MILITARY AND PARAMILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE CONGO

This report has been prepared in response to a query posed by ODCS/OPS, Department of the Army, regarding the purported use of witchcraft, sorcery, and magic by insurgent elements in the Republic of the Congo (Leopoldville). Magical practices are said to be effective in conditioning dissident elements and their followers to do battle with Government troops. Rebel tribesmen seem to have been persuaded that they can be made magically impervious to Congolese army fire-power. Their fear of Government forces has thus been diminished and, conversely, fear of the rebels has grown within army ranks.

The problem, therefore, which CINCPAC was asked to explore is the role of supernatural or superstitious concepts in a counterinsurgency campaign in the Congo.

Any reply to this question involves consideration of several factors. It is necessary to examine the nature of general African beliefs about magic, insofar as this may be done on the basis of published studies. It is also necessary to gain some insight as to the roles played by magic in other African revolutionary upheavals. And finally, it is suggested that today's insurgency situation in the Congo should not be studied in a vacuum, but should be considered as part of a continuum stemming from the pre-independence Belgian administration, the impact of Western culture upon African tribal systems, the circumstances of the birth of the Congo Republic, and the nature of the struggle for power within the Congo since 1960.

A review of available literature indicates that in Africa, uprisings embodying supernatural practices have tended to occur generally whenever the continued physical safety or internal power structure of a tribe or tribes has been seriously threatened. Manifestations of witchcraft and sorcery in these instances can be said to reflect, in part, a return to traditionalism. A tribe unites more readily when a threat is explainable and solutions are propounded in terms of tribal common denominators of belief. In order to determine the degree to which such a generalization is applicable to the current situation in the Congo, a brief recapitulation of certain aspects of recent Congolese history will serve as a useful point of departure.

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Origins of Congolese Political Instability

The tribal uprisings which have erupted in the Republic of the Congo (Leopoldville) since its independence in 1960 can be traced to situations which appeared to threaten the various tribes both in terms of their physical well-being and their position within the structure of Congolese national society. With independence, these tribes found themselves lacking the basic services which the colonial administration had provided--alimentation, hygiene, medical care, schools, and physical security--while at the same time the future of the tribe and its organization was being debated by the new government at Leopoldville. By and large, however, it was the disruption in government machinery which forced the younger members of the tribes to seek the urban centers in an effort to improve their situation, and pushed the older members back towards traditionalism and its beliefs in magic and witchcraft.

The actual disintegration of the Congo was caused by two main factors: the absence of associational groups which could replace the departing colonial administration; and the power struggle that took place between those Congolese political parties favoring centralism and those favoring federalism. This conflict prevented any attempts by Congolese governments to restore some semblance of administrative order.

The apparent docility of the Congolese people had led the Belgian colonial administration to believe its regime would endure, and that it could take its time in preparing the country for an eventual peaceful transfer of power. It was not until the bloody riots of January 5, 1959, that the Belgian Government realized that it would have to give freedom to the Congo much sooner than it had envisaged. In the ensuing agreements between Congolese representatives and the Belgian Government, provisions were made for the utilization of Belgian colonial civil servants in their former capacities until Congolese replacements could be trained. Such agreements were never implemented. On July 4, 1960, eight days after independence, the Congolese National Army in the capital city of Leopoldville mutinied against its Belgian officers, and in less than three days the mutiny had spread to the rest of the Congo where the position of all Belgian civilians became serious. On July 11, Belgian paratroopers occupied Leopoldville and other major Congolese cities, while the province of Katanga declared its independence. Kasai province was to follow suit in August. On July 12, Premier Patrice Lumumba called on the United Nations to eject the Belgian troops and help restore

order. In the few weeks following the arrival of UN forces, Lumumba's followers made repeated attempts to reimpose central governmental control on Katanga and Kasai. These attempts, and the high number of casualties resulting from them, precipitated a power struggle between the centralist bloc of Lumumba and the federalist bloc of President Joseph Kasavubu which paralyzed all government activity. Although Lumumba was eventually removed from office by the Army Chief of Staff, and a more or less Federal set-up with a strong executive was established the government remained virtually paralyzed by its effort to regain Katanga province. Anarchy thus set in, providing Lumumba's followers with opportunities to set up their own political organizations. These were cast along tribal lines, and the trappings of tribalism, including manifestations of beliefs in magic and witchcraft, began again to impinge upon politics at the national level.

Elements of East-West confrontation entered the picture when the situation in the Congo was internationalized. By calling in the United Nations, Lumumba had hoped that it would help him in his efforts to restore central government control over Kasai and Katanga provinces while also helping him train civil service cadres to replace the Belgians who had departed after the July riots. In the UN, Lumumba had received his initial support from the Afro-Asian and Communist Blocs. But when the United Nations refused to accede to all his demands, he turned against it and accepted the proffered assistance of the Communist Bloc countries, along with that of Ghana, Guinea, and the United Arab Republic. Communist machinations, and subsequent attempts by UN Ghanaian troops to disarm the Congolese Army seemed to have prompted General Mobutu to stage the removal of Lumumba. With the overthrow of Lumumba and the ejection of all Communist Bloc missions from the Congo by Mobutu, it appeared that Communist influence in the Congo was reduced to a minimum in spite of the fact that some of Lumumba's left-leaning associates remained actively on the scene. The present recurrence of Communist agitation seems, however, to derive its main impetus from the Chinese Communist Mission in Burundi.

The role being played today by tribalism, with its attendant reversion to other aspects of traditionalism, can be understood fully only in the light of the effect on the tribes of the transition from colonialism to full independence. Belgian colonial policy was, in general, paternalistic in tone and indirect in administration. The Belgian administration assumed the role of tutor, and dealt with local populations through local indigenous institutions. It was thought

that this process would be less disruptive and would condition local societies to accept foreign rule more readily. With particular reference to the tribes, indirect rule resulted in the incorporation of the tribal chiefs into the administrative system. With minor exceptions, the Belgian administration came to control the tribe through its chief, leaving the internal organization of the tribe intact. In a sense, a chief became the principal agent between his tribe and the colonial authorities.

Thus the Belgians accepted the traditional boundaries of the chiefdoms, reemphasized the hereditary character of tribal chieftancy, and made the chiefs responsible for population registration, public health, tax collection, security, and labor matters within the respective chiefdoms. It was mainly in the field of jurisprudence, and especially punitive actions, that the traditional powers of the chiefs were curtailed. Too, the ability of tribal members to appeal directly to colonial authorities on legal points, and the fact that Europeans could disregard tribal immigration barriers established by the chiefs and recruit labor at will, tended to reduce the overall effectiveness of the chiefs.

Expanding economic opportunities, missionary activity, and the suppression of intertribal warfare contributed in the long-run to the gradual erosion of the role of tribal communities in the social structure of the Congo as a whole. With the establishment of major urban centers, and the close contact between Europeans and Congolese which they afforded, a new class of Congolese began to emerge. The longer they remained in the cities, the weaker became their tribal attachments, until in the post World War II era many were to harbor strongly anti-tribal sentiments. This new class was known as évolués (literally: evolved), and most évolué leaders came to regard the continued existence of a tribal society as typifying backwardness and colonialism.

With independence, most of the évolués, of which Patrice Lumumba was one, became identified with the centralist political bloc, while others, such as Moïse Tshombe and Joseph Kasavubu, tribal chieftains in their own right, formed the federalist bloc of political parties. The centralists viewed any federal set-up as an attempt to preserve colonial influence and practices, while the federalists viewed centralism as the attempted elimination of political opposition and the establishment of a dictatorship similar to that of Ghana and Guinea. The power struggle between these two blocs prevented the drafting of a constitution clearly defining the role and position of the tribes, and it was not until recently that

this was resolved in the form of a federal system with a strong executive. This represented a compromise between centralist and federalist points of view. It recognizes tribal structures, but underlines the authority of the central government. Unfortunately, the persistence of political chaos and insurgency has hindered the restoration of effective governmental machinery, and until this machinery is restored no objective evaluation of the compromise system will be possible.

Supernatural Aspects of the Present Insurgency Situation

We began this discussion with an observation that threats to the concept or form of tribal structures in Africa tend to generate uprisings characterized by emphasis upon traditionalist elements in African life. The current uprisings in the Congo, and for that matter elsewhere in black Africa, gain impetus from the insurgent practice of employing magical procedures to convince tribal insurgents that no harm can be done to them by forces of the central government.

These tactics are effective, because in the Congo and elsewhere in black Africa beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery, magic, and other supernatural phenomena are deeply rooted among the people. Although the manifestations of these beliefs vary widely according to tribal and cultural circumstances, magic-religious causes are usually cited to explain misfortunes of any kind, even those of clearly natural origin. If crops are blighted, if a hut caves in and kills its occupants, if the chief becomes unfriendly, or if sudden illness or death occur, bewitching is usually given as the primary cause. The people may understand that in fact the house fell because termites ate away the foundations, but that it fell at the time it did was a result of witchcraft or sorcery. Witchcraft is also cited as a factor in personal disputes, especially where the relationship is inherently subject to tensions--as for example, in the relationship between husband and wife, or between co-wives. In these cases, not only physical or direct remedies, but occult remedies as well are considered necessary to counteract the evil influence.

A distinction drawn by Evans-Pritchard in his Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande (Oxford University Press, 1937) which is helpful for purposes of study is that between witchcraft and sorcery. Although these two concepts often overlap, especially in application (the same person may be thought to practice sorcery as well as witchcraft), they do represent two distinct theories of supernatural behavior which are shared by practically all African tribal societies.

A sorcerer is one who is thought to practice evil magic against others.

The techniques of sorcery may be learned by anyone, and are usually based upon the use of various organic or vegetable compounds called "medicines" which, when prepared according to stringent ritualistic requirements, are believed to acquire magical properties enabling them to work the will of the sorcerer.

The reciprocal to the concept of sorcery, i.e. the practice of evil magic, is the concept of the use of magical rites or medicines for socially-approved purposes. These include everything from the protection of personal safety, to improvement of soil fertility, to success at the hunt or in battle. In short, "good" magic may be invoked to stimulate good results in any phase of the life cycle. Again, strict and proper ritual must be observed in the preparation of the necessary medicines, and these rituals--which include taboo observance, verbal formulae, etc.--are idiosyncratic to particular tribes, and even to differing schools of thought within the same tribe or sub-tribe.

Witchcraft, on the other hand, is said to be an inborn trait which enables its possessor to harm other people merely by wishing to do so. "Medicines" play no part in true bewitching operations. Some tribes believe that witchcraft power is activated by feelings of hostility or envy over without conscious decision on the part of the witch--or even without the witch's knowing that he contains witchcraft power within him. In the Congo, belief that the witchcraft power was embodied as a physical substance in the belly was so widespread that the Belgian authorities had to ban the practice of tribal elders' performing autopsies upon the bodies of suspected witches after death. In 1924 the colonial administration also banned use of the poison ordeal--the other universally accepted method of screening suspected witches. (Ritually-prepared poison was administered to suspects in the belief that the innocent would survive and the guilty perish.)

Although Africa's infrastructure of supernatural beliefs and practices has been subjected to concentrated assault by Europeans--primarily missionaries--for as long as five hundred years in some areas, few lasting inroads have been made against ingrained traditions. In the Congo, practically all education since 1878 has been in the hands of various Catholic and Protestant missionary groups. Missionary activities have succeeded in establishing rather substantial church organizations and church membership, but closer examination reveals that to the extent that Christian and other European influences have taken root in the Congo, they have also often been modified so as to merge with, not supersede, the traditional foundations of the country and its people. Europeanized Congolese

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may carry amulets and charms, consult oracles about the advisability of business transactions, and observe other rituals learned in childhood. Others hold both traditional and Christian funeral ceremonies. Institutionally, many syncretic sects--often pseudo-Christian--stand between Christianity and tradition, started by prophets who believed they were divinely inspired. Most began as messianic cults but developed nationalistic and anti-European characteristics along the way.

Among the people, there is little evidence that traditional beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery, and magic have been diminished by Western influences. The evidence is rather that the practice of secret magical rites is on the increase. History indicates that beliefs in witches and magic die hard in all societies. And because of Africa's particular cultural setting, it is unlikely that these beliefs will disappear other than as a result of generations of careful and gradual education in the Western mold. Western education is not, however, an immediate solution. In Africa beliefs in magic and witchcraft are used to explain ultimate causations--the existence and origin of fortune and misfortune. Western secular education does not provide unequivocal answers to questions of such a fundamental nature.

Western institutions have, as a matter of fact, served in some ways to increase tensions and anxieties in African societies, especially as these relate to superstitious beliefs and practices. The control of witches and sorcerers is of paramount importance to people who believe in magic. Yet the imposition of political systems of a Western type upon African tribes has resulted in the elimination of the most efficacious witch-control measure--the poison ordeal. In addition, the execution of convicted witches and sorcerers is no longer allowed. As a result, many Africans feel that western political systems such as the modern state have aligned themselves on the side of evil because from their standpoint the "civilized" elimination of traditional control measures work to protect witches and sorcerers from retaliation by their innocent victims. The African man-in-the-bush is, therefore, much more at the mercy of those who wish to harm him by supernatural means than ever before. He thus tends to rely more and more upon the witch-doctor* who, in the absence of the poison ordeal and

* The term witch-doctor is used in the popular sense for the convenience of the reader. A more precise but less familiar term would be magic-religious practitioner, since the practices attributed to witch-doctors neither necessarily include, nor are confined to witchcraft per se, but may include sorcery and other forms of magic as well.

other drastic sanctions, provides the main source of protection from evil.

Counterinsurgency Analysis

In the context of current insurgency situations in Kivu and Katanga, where insurgents rely upon "medicines" and ritualistic observances to protect them from firepower, the suggestion to devise and employ magical procedures in counterinsurgency operations is obvious and tempting. Before adopting this course of action, however, the U.S. counterinsurgency planner should give serious consideration to several pertinent factors:

A. In the event that the U.S. role, if any, in the Congo will be of an advisory character, the advisors must rely upon the extent of their influence upon Congolese counterparts. U.S. policy recommendations must, therefore, be acceptable to Congolese leaders. The Congolese leadership class is drawn almost exclusively from a small elite group who, having obtained Western education under the Belgians, have become "Europeanized" (a concept virtually equivalent to "civilized") to the extent that they are known as evolus. Kasavubu, Lumumba, Kalonji, Adoula, Mobutu, and Tshombe are all evolus and as such are fiercely proud of their "civilized" status and image. These evolus can be expected to resist any association with policies which might reflect endorsement of "uncivilized" behavior, even though they themselves might be to some extent dependent upon secret charms or other superstitious beliefs or practices.

B. Although beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery, and magic are endemic throughout sub-Saharan Africa, these beliefs vary considerably in detail according to tribe or sub-tribe. Literally, one man's charm might be another man's poison, depending upon particular tribal beliefs. It follows that the counterinsurgency planner, should he desire to exploit the psychological potential of superstition, must be able to compile and analyze a large quantity of specific and detailed information embracing the entire spectrum of superstitious beliefs and other charms of the specific ethnic group with which he is concerned. This tends to relegate the use of magic to limited tactical objectives rather than broad strategic concept or solutions to fundamental problems. By the same token, however, the prevalence of superstitious beliefs in Africa suggests that the counterinsurgency planner requires considerable information about these beliefs for intelligence and counter intelligence purposes alone. A sound understanding of magical concepts, practices and mannerisms is necessary for defensive purposes should they play any role of importance in an insurgency situation. Knowledge of the specific uses of charms,

medicines, bodily scarification, and the like, will help to identify membership in a particular cult, or will enable patterns of activity to be defined. Failing complete and detailed information of this type, both operational and counter-intelligence planning will be unrealistic. Unfortunately, such information may not be quickly acquired about the more than 200 reported tribes in the Congo, but must be painstakingly gathered and evaluated over a long period of time. Detailed studies of supernatural beliefs of specific tribes are limited. The secrecy inherent in most magic rituals presents a formidable obstacle to the outside investigator, whether he may be a scientist or an intelligence agent.

C. And finally, the tactics employed to counter current insurgencies in various parts of the Congo must be evaluated in terms not only of their immediate effectiveness against the short-term military problem, but in terms also of their positive or negative influence upon the long-range problem of establishing a viable political system.

It cannot be denied that the exploitation of superstitious beliefs by insurgent leaders is a double-edged weapon. Fear of magic and witchcraft can be reversed and used with telling effect against the insurgents. If reliable and detailed operational intelligence can be gathered, counterinsurgency planners will be able to concoct "medicines" and other devices within the superstitious framework of the target group, with which to neutralize and overpower the magic spells cast by insurgent witch-doctors. These procedures could well involve a continuing duel of thrust and parry, because the witch-doctors could also be counted upon to devise counter-counter measures, and so forth. But there is little doubt that counter-magic tactics properly conceived and imaginatively executed could be quite effective in achieving short-run victories. A broader question is whether the exploitation of superstition in this fashion is not also a triple-edged weapon, in that superstition itself, rather than the central government, may become, in the long-run, the main beneficiary. Since tribalism and superstition, so closely related to each other, have provided a fertile seedbed for political instability in the Congo, any measures which enhance the divisive and destructive aspects of tribalism simply lay additional obstacles in the already cluttered path toward Congolese nationhood. Should the central government successfully use occult methods to defeat a movement based upon such methods, the very concepts of sorcery and magic which lend impetus to the insurgencies of the moment may gain and strength and acquire even greater trouble.

making potential for the future. In other words, the more successful the counterinsurgency campaign, if that campaign is based upon a counter-magic approach, the more ominous the outlook for the future. My thesis that an insurgency inspired or sustained by magical concepts may be defeated more easily and at less cost and trouble by employing counter-magic is therefore questionable on these grounds.

Nor does the current situation in the Congo represent anything new in the history of insurgency insofar as the use of magical practices is concerned. History is replete with instances wherein uprisings have been reinforced by magic spells. The T'ai P'ing rebellion in China was led by a man who represented himself as the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The Boxer cultists believed that they could cause cannon to fall apart at great distances by psycho-kinetic means. Those who took the Mau Mau oaths in Kenya were taught that oath violation would be instantly lethal. African history contains numerous other examples of similar phenomena (the "Maji-Maji" rebellion in Tanganyika, the Makonde uprising in Portuguese East Africa, etc.). Current problems in the Congo as well as the Lumpa uprising in Northern Rhodesia today exemplify the same superstition manifestations.

Any study of historical examples of uprisings supported by superstitious practices, however, will reveal that vigorous military counter-measures of a conventional nature have produced optimum results in suppressing the insurgency. If there are substantial political or economic motives behind the uprisings, these naturally must be taken into account. The reference here is to military tactics and their effects against magic.

Despite the ingrained quality of superstition throughout black Africa, there is a certain core of pragmatism immediately applicable to the present problem. The history of messianic movements and especially those movements whose primary function is the detection and/or neutralization of witchcraft and sorcery reveals that Africans easily recognize and accept concrete proof of the ineffectiveness of a particular magical rite or charm. Such recognition and acceptance in no way affect the basic pattern of belief in magic. The opposite is in fact true, as is proven by the continuing succession of short-lived anti-witchcraft cults throughout Africa. Africans are quite prepared to admit that they have been fooled by a particular practitioner or cult. The pattern then is to reject the

"false" cult and accept one which, until events prove otherwise, is the "real thing." The same type of mental processes seem to apply to witch-doctors themselves. Informed opinion is that most witch-doctors believe themselves as individuals to be clever charlatans, since they are aware that they really have no magic power. But an individual witch-doctor is also likely to believe that he alone is a charlatan and that his colleagues do indeed have magical abilities.

In the Congo, as elsewhere in black Africa, there is every reason to believe that disciplined troops, proficient in marksmanship, and led by competent officers, can handily dispel most notions of magical invulnerability. It is quite true that the raising of such a force may pose more problems in the Congo than in some other areas, but the problem is by no means insoluble. The elite gendarmerie organized by the Belgians to offset the ill-disciplined Force Publique is an example of what can be done in the Congo. The same concept of the gendarmerie was employed, together with foreign mercenaries, by Moise Tshombe in the Katanga secessionist movement. Tshombe's forces were generally conceded to be highly effective, and were suppressed only with great difficulty by the United Nations.

The immediate military problems related to the Congo's fundamental problems of instability and chaos appear more susceptible to lasting solution by conventional methods than by reliance upon purely psychological or occult phenomena whose values are limited to support functions in tactical situations and whose implementation is fraught with long-run risks. Drawing upon the Belgian experience as well as that of Tshombe in Katanga, it would appear that a more flexible approach to the military problem is to be found in the concept of elite troops: troops which are carefully trained and disciplined, and which are well-commanded. Unit morale and the confidence engendered by good training, knowledge of weaponry, and, above all, dynamic and competent leadership, can go far to counteract superstitious fears.

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